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Getting our message across: Strategic reflections on modernizing statistical communication

Is there a need for communication makeover in statistical institutes?

Note by the Central Bureau of Statistics of Croatia

Summary

The note presents a case for renewing the communication strategy of a statistical office to meet the new challenges. In the modern society official statistics are expected to communicate not only data and information but also their value, in line with the vision, purpose and defined strategic goals. The way in which statistical authorities express themselves can influence their image, reputation and visibility among stakeholders, users and the general public.

Organizing modern communication requires flexibility and openness, as well as cooperation with a broad range of organizational units. Statistical authorities need a modern, proactive communication strategy with clearly defined key messages and a list of communication tactics for different target groups on different communication channels. Modern communication strategy should be a living document that is reviewed periodically – in accordance with the strategic plan, future activities and the best practices used by others.

The document is presented to the Conference of European Statisticians' seminar on "Getting our message across: Strategic reflections on modernizing statistical communication", Session 1 "Strategic communications" for discussion.

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I. Introduction

1. Changes in the society have produced challenges in all phases of statistical production, but the demand for data and changes in perception of its importance have naturally caused a shift towards better communication and presentation. National Statistical Institutes all over the world are therefore willingly embracing different initiatives from European and international organizations which aim to increase the emphasis on communication of official statistics. The ESS Vision 2020 provided institutions dealing with official statistics a guiding frame for the further development. The ESS Vision 2020 is a clear indication that user orientation is recognised as a priority, and that special attention should be given to dissemination and communication.

2. On the other hand, UNECE High-level Group for the Modernisation of Official Statistics is continuously working on modernisation topics with the recent focus on communication within The Strategic Communication Framework. These initiatives demonstrate that communication is becoming vital part of statistical processes. Many institutions recognized the need for communication makeover and are already using the given opportunities to engage themselves in the available projects on the principle of learning by working. The achievements and the results from this teamwork will serve as a solid ground for further improvements.

3. Although communication was for decades considered as a part of dissemination, changes in modern society and key trends have forced the NSI´s to think "outside the box" and to increasingly become output oriented using several different approaches, instead of general one. The usage of modern information technology, followed by imminent data revolution, has affected the changes of the users´ expectations and behaviour. All this resulted in gradual abandoning of the old dissemination methods (where the statistical process ended with making the data available to users) and moving towards communication and building users relationships.

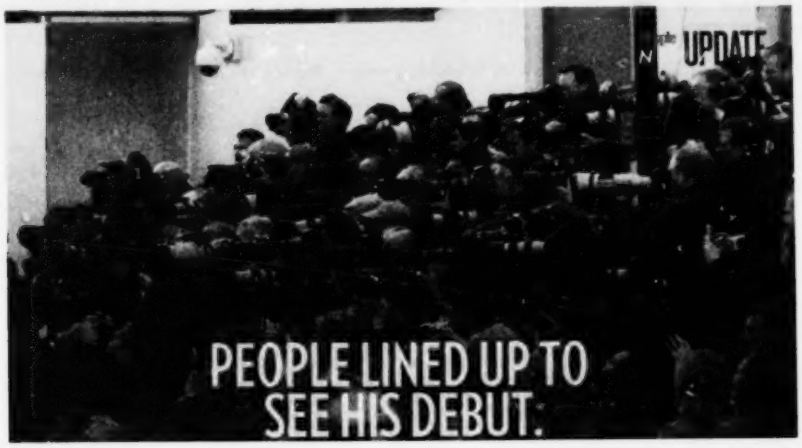
4. Since official statistics is a public good that serves the society by providing coherent evidence for making the sound and sustainable decisions, NSI´s should do their best to maintain the relevance of official statistics as a trustworthy source of information. In this process, communication is playing the key role. The lack of a proactive communication strategy may result with reputational loss and diminishing trust in statistics which we do not wish to face.

II. Time, attention and relevance have become scarce resources – use it wisely

5. Use of traditional communication tools such as press releases or press conferences and the exclusive use of traditional communication channels such as newspaper or television is no longer sufficient. Traditional tools and channels should not be marginalised or underestimated but, in the information era, it is hard to depend only on third parties. Journalists and media representatives might or might not recognise the relevance of a particular statistical release and may decide to give statistics a few lines or a few seconds of media space.

6. The most recent example is Eurostat´s release of government deficit and debt data, based on figures reported for the purpose of the excessive deficit procedure (EDP). The release was planned in advance. It usually grabs a lot of media attention but coincidentally on the same day Prince William and Kate Middleton's third royal baby was born. That was the news of the day, not only in the UK and Europe but also in the world´s media.

Picture 1
Media representatives in front of St. Mary's hospital



Source: people.com

7. NSIs have the opportunity to communicate directly with their target audience using new communication channels and tools but have to find the most suitable mode of communicating to different users on the different platforms.

8. The usage of digital technology decentralized traditional communication where the media played the main role in spreading information, thus allowing NSIs to share facts and figures while creating relationship with the current users and reaching potential users. Communication officers have opportunity to create a positive influence on NSIs' image, reputation and visibility among stakeholders, users and general public if they use scarce resources such as time, attention and relevance wisely.

A. Time

9. The study by Dr. Thurman has shown that online editions have doubled or tripled the number of readers of national newspapers but the increased exposure disguises huge differences in attention paid by print and online readers. The print newspapers are read for an average of 40 minutes per day, while online visitors to the websites and apps of those same newspapers spend an average of just 30 seconds per day.

10. What does it mean? Preparing data and information for different communication channels requires distinct methods and principles due to the fact the users spend selective time reading the same information on different platforms. Therefore, the content should be adapted to achieve the maximum communication effect. The statistical article prepared for the website and shared through mailing list to journalists who asked for news releases should contain more data, analysis and methodology than the release on the social media whose main goal is to grab attention and lead the reader to the website.

B. Attention

11. One of the most famous Bill Gates quotes is "content is king", but even the best content needs an effective communication strategy. Marshall McLuhan said it best with his famous adage "the medium is the message".

12. One of the best ways to grab someone's attention in short and scarce time slot, is to have perfect content on the appropriate communication platform. Identifying the best "medium" can mean the difference between good content being lost in the shuffle and reaching the perfect audience.

13. According to B2C[1] Content Marketing report, the top three most effective types of content B2C marketers use are:

- Social media posts;
- Videos (pre-produced);
- Illustrations/photos.

14. Although NSI´s are generally not profit-oriented institutions, they are communicating with users on a similar basis, using the best possible and most effective solutions on different media platforms to help their institution achieve specific objectives. The statistical language used is of utmost importance when trying to grab attention of the different user groups. When communicating with the proficient statistical users who are familiar with the methodology, we should utilize statistical terminology to make statistical analysis and share the results. On the other hand, when communicating with the general public we should use plain language to help them understand the message we are trying to send.

C. Relevance

15. The relevance of the specific statistical theme depends on various factors that usually cannot be predicted in advance. To make statistics relevant all the time and not only when it is in focus by the public, due to drastic changes in trends, we could use data storytelling as a regular method of communication. The selection of potential interesting or nice-to-know topics can be connected to celebrating different national or international days, holidays, specific theme that arose in the media or something that can be characterised as special and of wide interest to the public.

16. Additionally, but not less importantly accent on the relevance of official statistics can be obtained with statistical literacy content. Education materials such as e-books, videos, games or similar content are building up the relevance by giving added value to the usual daily content.

III. Revive your communication strategy - re-set, re-adjust, re-start, re-focus… as many times as you need to

17. If you have the feeling that you are working hard and not accomplishing very much, then you are probably stuck in a circle where all efforts made cannot result with tangible and easily seen results. The main challenges you need to cope with in this situation is to decide where you want to go, or in other words, it is essential to focus on what you want to achieve and how you are planning to achieve it. These are the challenges every institution is facing without exemption so achievement plans should be re-evaluated from time to time, especially when the obtained results are not in line with planned ones.

[1] B2C - Business-to-consumer – refers to commerce between a business and an individual consumer. While it applies to any type of direct-to-consumer selling, it has come to be associated with online selling, also known as e-commerce or e-tailing.

18. It is always good to start from the beginning. In our case with the institution's vision and mission whose main purpose is to show a clear direction to all individuals and the management. The best-case scenario is when everyone in the institution understands the importance of these statements and when everyone is literally living them in their own surroundings. That kind of synergy makes the difference and pulls the institution towards unique goal.

19. The vision as a future oriented declaration of the institution's purpose, and the mission as a general plan for achieving that vision are usually defined in a main strategic document, the general strategy of the institution. Although institutions have only one vision and mission, they may have several additional strategies addressing the core values of the institution or focusing on the general goals of the institution. The communication strategy, as well as every other defined strategy, surely has to be in line with the general one, usually called umbrella strategy.

20. As statistical institutions are unique and the scope of statistical activities can be challenging to explain and to communicate, we should be as creative and innovative as we can in setting up our communication strategies. As Christine Cawthorne said when giving the keynote speech at New Techniques and Technologies for Statistics (NTTS) conference "Sorry Statisticians, but marketing is your job too."

A. Communication goals

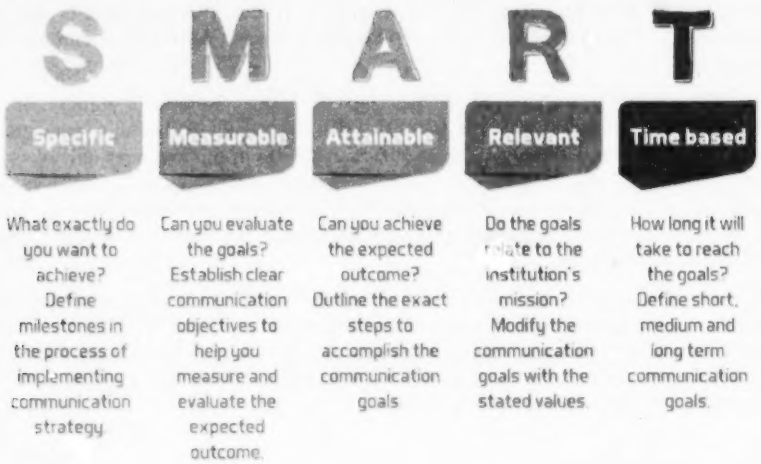
21. Institutions can have different communication goals that will define if their communication strategy is proactive or reactive. The main question is how communication activities can support the implementation of our strategic communication goals that can be different from one institution to another mainly due to different level of development of institutions as well as the statistical system in general in certain country.

22. If the institution decides to communicate proactively, and that is the latest communication trend we are all striving to, the defined communication goals can be:

- improve the promotion of official statistics and the work of a statistical institute within the statistical system;
- improve the promotion of institution's products and services;
- provide added value – e.g. educational aspects;
- improve the data storytelling method;
- increase the usage of visualisation to communicate data;
- reduce misunderstanding and misinterpretation of statistical data, etc.

23. The goals should be designed to supplement each other and focus on what you want to achieve. Furthermore, we should have on mind not to set too many goals as we might lose focus. When thinking about setting communication goals, bear on mind the SMART principle:

Figure 1
SMART goal setting

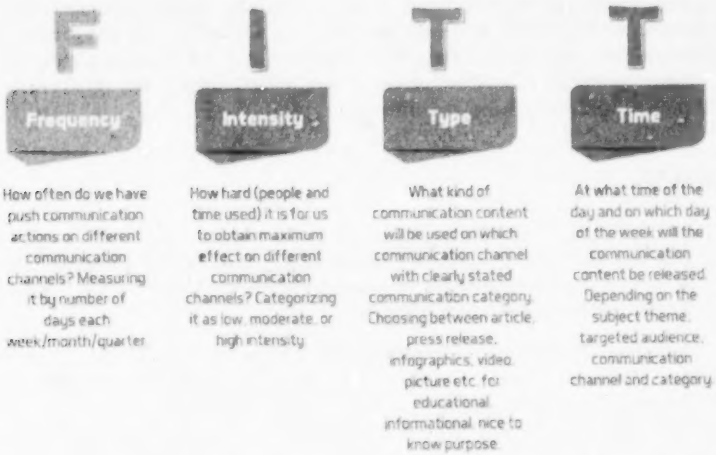

S
M
A
R
T
Specific
Measurable
Attainable
Relevant
Time based
What exactly do you want to achieve? Define milestones in the process of implementing communication strategy.
Can you evaluate the goals? Establish clear communication objectives to help you measure and evaluate the expected outcome.
Can you achieve the expected outcome? Outline the exact steps to accomplish the communication goals.
Do the goals relate to the institution's mission? Modify the communication goals with the stated values.
How long it will take to reach the goals? Define short, medium and long term communication goals.

B. Communication objectives

24. Clearly defined objectives are turning communication goal's general statement of what is to be accomplished into a specific, quantifiable, time-sensitive statement of what is going to be achieved and when it will be achieved. For the successful implementation of communication strategy, the goals and the objectives have to be clearly planned in detailed action plan, often called strategic planning. Communication action plans should be specific actions or activities that will be used to achieve a goal within the constraints of the objective. Thriving action plan should be as simple as possible with enough information to capture the essence. For communication purposes we made initial action plan based on the FITT principle (see Figure 2).

25. The communication action plan has to be seen as a fluid document due to unplanned activities and unpredictable situations every statistical institution is facing from time to time.

Figure 2
FITT action plan setting


F
I
T
T
Frequency
Intensity
Type
Time
How often do we have push communication actions on different communication channels? Measuring it by number of days each week/month/quarter
How hard (people and time used) it is for us to obtain maximum effect on different communication channels? Categorizing it as low, moderate, or high intensity
What kind of communication content will be used on which communication channel with clearly stated communication category. Choosing between article, press release, infographics, video, picture etc. for educational, informational, nice to know purpose.
At what time of the day and on which day of the week will the communication content be released. Depending on the subject theme, targeted audience, communication channel and category

IV. Conclusion

26. The communication strategy is a living document and surely cannot be seen as something that is "cast in stone". It can and should be updated and modified as many times as necessary to assure the fulfilment of set communication goals.

27. One of the communication goals of the CBS for 2017 was to successfully organize national phase of the European Statistics Competition in Croatia for the first time and at the same time increase statistical literacy within secondary school students. As all defined objectives for both goals were either fulfilled or exceeded, both communication goals were reached with the results that were above all our expectations. Although we got tangible proof that we have made successful makeover of CBS's communication strategy, one additional recognition arrived from the Croatian Public Relations Association.

28. Since 2007, every year, the Croatian Public Relations Association is organizing the competition called Grand PRix as an acknowledgment of recognition to colleagues for excellence in the design and implementation of strategic communications and public relations projects. The competition has several categories and one of them is Grand Prix for public relations in government bodies of the Republic of Croatia for which the CBS was awarded for the successful communication of the national phase of ESC. Two years before we entered in finals (top three communication projects), did not receive the award for 2015 but had enough time to fine tune the communication strategy that has proven to be good decision from different perspectives.

29. Although in our team no one had any prior experience in communication, the mindsets of individuals with the full support of the Director General made the positive movement towards the image of modern, user-centric proactive statistical institution. Since the communication strategy needs to be completely evaluated from time to time with adequate measurement tools we are anxiously waiting for the new round of User satisfaction survey. The comprehensive results regarding reputation of official statistics and the visibility among stakeholders, users and the public will be analysed in detail and depending on the obtained results further steps will be undertaken.

30. If communication officers, and above all, management of statistical institutions want to live happily ever after, they should be aware that statistical authorities need a modern, proactive communication strategy with clearly defined key messages and a list of communication tactics for different target groups on different communication channels. Modern communication strategy is a living document that should be reviewed periodically – in accordance with the strategic plan, future activities and the best practices used by others. Being strategic is a state of mind and understanding the importance of communication is what really makes the difference.

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